

2 September 1975

MEMORANDUM FOR: Director of Medical Services

SUBJECT : Observations on the Impact, Utility,
and Validity of PSS Tests

1. For over twenty years, the results of tests given by PSS to applicants and employees, and especially the [REDACTED], have played some role in personnel decisions affecting the individuals tested. We are frequently asked: (a) how large a role? (b) how useful? (c) how valid? The short answers, respectively: (a) don't know; (b) evidently, quite useful; (c) demonstrably, quite valid.

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2. The first question, dealing with the impact of the tests, is the hardest to answer. The reason lies in the way in which the Agency utilizes the test results. To the eternal credit of those who established the testing program, no assumptions were ever made as to what the level of intelligence, the desirable attitudes the appropriate interests, the ideal personality of the intelligence officer ought to be. Instead, three other assumptions governed. The first was that the diversity of professional jobs in the Agency accommodated such a wide range of abilities, interests, and personalities that selection in terms of anyone's stereotypical "ideal" was bound to be off base. The second was that the people best able to make the selection and assignment decisions were not a remote group of "experts" but those closest to the job: the immediate supervisors and the personnel officials in the component concerned. The third assumption was that the best contribution which a psychological testing program could make to the selection and assignment process was to serve up a descriptive picture of the candidate, providing information on general abilities, interests, attitudes and personality which those closest to the job can translate into pluses and minuses for the particular position as only they see and

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STATINTL understand it. This line of reasoning gave direction to a testing program which saw its function as not one of setting cut-off scores, minimum standards, or recommendations for or against, but rather one of providing useful descriptive information to enlighten the decision-maker's task. Thus the typical report to the Skills Bank reports neither scores, pass-fail determinations nor hire-don't hire judgments, but hopefully does say something about the applicant which can be useful in arriving at suitability determinations. How much weight is given to such information, in relation to all of the other data about the applicant that is available to the decision-maker, is obviously dependent upon a great many variables and varies greatly from case to case. The amount, detail, and quality of the "other information", the extent to which the psychological test report is either congruent with or inconsistent with the other information, the experience and attitudes of the decision-maker in respect to the use of the psychological data are just some of the factors affecting the weight accorded the test information in a given case.

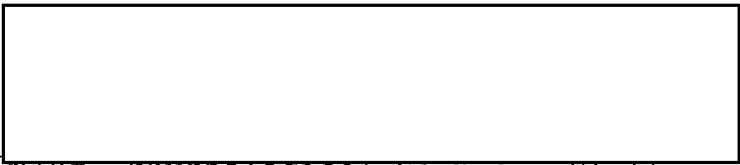
3. The second question, how useful is the test data, has a more empirical answer. For while its impact in a given case will vary greatly, the demand by consumers for this information is insistent and widespread. The most convincing evidence on this score comes from the response of consumers to proposals which arise from time to time to suspend or postpone the infusion of test results until a later stage in the applicant processing. The insistence of consumers that test reports should be available at the earliest stage of applicant consideration speaks definitively to the question of their utility in the deliberative process.

4. Impact and utility, of course, say nothing about validity. The history of psychological testing is replete with examples of great reliance placed upon testing procedures of no demonstrated validity. Equal employment opportunity concerns have thrown a welcome spotlight on validity questions, stimulating research in many organizations which otherwise might not have been undertaken. PSS has traditionally taken the position that definitive studies to determine the relationship between test scores and job performance criteria are imperative. The ultimate ideal is a series of prediction equations forecasting the success of a given applicant in any of the multitude of Agency job possibilities for which he (she) is at least theoretically subject to consideration at the time of testing. The

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practical obstacles to achievement of this ideal are myriad. Nevertheless, opportunities to explore the relationship between tests and job success are continuously pursued, resulting in a body of research over the years which has added significantly to the predictive utility of the tests.

5. The accompanying paper reviews a number of these studies and their findings. Wherever possible, these findings are used to give specific direction to our reporting on candidates who are being considered, or may be considered, for jobs in areas where the research results have specific relevance. In toto, they constitute an impressive verification of the reasoning which underlies the basic approach to the use of psychological testing in the Agency--not as a qualifying hurdle but as a useful and valid management tool. STATINTL


Chief, Psychological Services Staff
Office of Medical Services

Attachment
As Stated Above

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